

1-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

Hudson, Susan. "Les Soeurs Grises of Lewiston, Maine 1878-1908: An Ethnic Religious Feminist Expression." *Maine History* 40, 4 (2002): 309-331. <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol40/iss4/4>

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LES SOEURS GRISES OF LEWISTON, MAINE 1878-1908: AN ETHNIC RELIGIOUS FEMINIST EXPRESSION

BY SUSAN HUDSON

Lewiston, Maine's first public hospital became a reality in 1889 when the Sisters of Charity of Montreal, the "Grey Nuns," opened the doors of the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes. This hospital was central to the Grey Nuns' mission of providing social services for Lewiston's predominately French-Canadian mill workers. Susan Hudson explores the obstacles faced by the Grey Nuns as they struggled to establish their institution despite meager financial resources, language barriers, and in the face of opposition from the established medical community. Susan Pearman Hudson is a Ph.D. candidate at Catholic University of America and a member of the Executive Foundation and Mission Effectiveness Boards at St. Mary's Regional Medical Center.

INSTITUTION BUILDING from the secular to the sacred was an essential aspect of the industrial transformation and corresponding urbanization of the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. Two of the industries that transformed the State of Maine during this period were textiles and shoe manufacturing. In the city of Lewiston, mills lined the banks of the Androscoggin River running between Lewiston and its twin city Auburn. In addition to the textile mills, Lewiston also supported a variety of manufacturing companies. By the end of the nineteenth century the most prominent companies were the Cowan Woolen Company, Lewiston Falls Manufacturing Company, and R. C. Pingree & Company, all employing between 50 to 180 laborers. The city of Lewiston attracted industry because it provided the mills with cheap hydro-electric power, drawn from a series of waterfalls, located on the upper waters of the Androscoggin River, while also using the river as a natural sewer for the disposal of industrial waste.¹



Water power provided by the Androscoggin River fostered the growth of textile mills in Lewiston and Auburn during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lewiston, Maine, ca. 1900. *Courtesy Franco-American Heritage Collection, Lewiston-Auburn College/University of Southern Maine.*

The unprecedented expansion in the Northeastern textile industry following the Civil War resulted in both the rapid acquisition of wealth by the industry's elite and an acute wage labor shortage in the textile mills that could not be adequately met by the native Yankee work force. Aided by the expansion of the American railway system, sources of rural labor previously unavailable were now being sought by textile recruiting agents. In both Maine and Boston, newspapers carried advertisements for wage labor work in the Lewiston mills. The first immigrants to respond to Lewiston's labor crisis were predominantly Irish, but they were shortly followed by French Canadians migrating from the Province of Quebec. These were, in turn, followed by Acadians from the Maritime Provinces and the St. John Valley.²

Immigration historians have estimated that between 1850 and 1900 over 300,000 French Canadians immigrated to New England mill towns in search of wage labor. According to the records maintained in the Chancery of the Diocese of Portland, there were no Catholics in Lewiston in 1846. Four years later, however, the Chancery recorded 125 Irish Catholic families. The first French-Canadian family immigrated from Kingsey, Quebec to Lewiston in 1860 and ten years later there was a community of 689 French Canadians in the city. According to the *Lewis-*

ton Weekly Journal, French Canadians were arriving in Lewiston at the rate of 100 to 150 per day in 1875. By 1880, this community would grow to over four thousand inhabitants.³

Catholic French Canadians who emigrated from Quebec to Maine occupied the bottom strata of a socio-economic system that functioned according to the dictates of laissez faire capitalism. In the city of Lewiston, French Canadians lived on the margins of a Yankee-controlled society in the mill district known as "Petite Canada." The majority of Petite Canada's residents were wage laborers and thus financially dependent upon the market position of the textile industry. This in turn contributed to economic insecurity in the community and harsh consequences during times of high unemployment. Because social welfare resources were limited in late nineteenth-century Lewiston, unemployment quickly led to poverty and hunger.⁴

The lack of social welfare resources for French Canadians in Lewiston also fostered communal anxiety when the inhabitants of Petite Canada confronted such commonplace events as birth, illness, and death. The social segregation and impoverishment of the French Canadians forced them to search the resources of their immigrant community for help. Eventually this search led to Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec and to the Grey Nuns. In 1877, Lewiston French-Canadian Catholic clergy and community leaders extended an invitation to the Grey Nuns to found a mission in their city. Once the Grey Nuns established their convent in Lewiston and began their work, the plight of the lowest classes and, in particular, French-Canadian immigrants began to be mitigated. Due to the determination, skills, and Catholic beliefs of the Grey Nuns, childcare for the working class became a reality and the first hospital was opened to the public.

Establishing a Mission

It began with a train ride. On November 20, 1878 three Grey Nuns arrived in Lewiston via the Grand Trunk railroad from Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec. They were members of a Catholic women religious community canonically recognized as Les Soeurs de la Charité de Saint-Hyacinthe, founded in 1840. The Grey Nuns of Saint-Hyacinthe were a separate canonical branch of les Soeurs de la Charité de Montreal, founded by Saint Marguerite d'Youville in 1747.⁵

The Grey Nun order came to Lewiston at the request of Reverend Pierre Hevey who was also a native of Saint-Hyacinthe. Hevey had entered the Seminaire de Saint-Hyacinthe in 1850 and was ordained at the

age of twenty-six on July 12, 1857. Following two assignments to parishes in Quebec, Hevey migrated to the United States and joined the Portland Diocese in October 11, 1871. He was then sent to Lewiston to minister to the expanding French-Canadian population. As pastor of the French-Canadian church, Saint Peter and Paul, from 1871-1881, Hevey was a principle supporter of the Grey Nuns' social welfare and medical ministry. He was transferred to Manchester, N.H. where he remained until his death in 1910. It was not only his position as the spiritual leader to Lewiston's French-Canadian Catholics that gave Hevey the authority to guide his parishioners, but also, his natural ability to acquire wealth and expand his domain. Hevey's financial acumen was demonstrated by the savings bank that he established among his parishioners to finance the construction of Saint Peter and Paul Church. Hevey repeated this lucrative enterprise when he was transferred to Manchester, New Hampshire and established the first credit union in the United States.⁶

In 1877, Hevey wrote to the Grey Nuns' Superior General and requested that they come to Lewiston and minister to "a Canadian congregation and to visit the poor in their homes." According to the Grey Nuns' "Chronique," an internal document maintained by the community to record their history, Hevey's letter received a favorable response on September 13th: "It was decided today in the assembly that the administration of the community would accept the Lewiston mission and that the Superior herself would go visit the mission. The Superior would make the arrangements with Rev. Hevey for the condition this new foundation." The acceptance of Hevey's request by the Grey Nuns of Saint-Hyacinthe was the first step towards the establishment of a hospital and social welfare facilities that were under their authority for the following century.⁷

Hevey's invitation to this particular community of women religious was not accidental. As a native of Saint-Hyacinthe, Hevey knew of the Grey Nuns' expertise as both teachers and nursing-sisters. In turn, the Grey Nuns' openness to Hevey's invitation and willingness to help Lewiston's suffering poor were grounded in the order's religious self-understanding as the spiritual daughters of Marguerite d'Youville. The sisters' desire to expand their order into Lewiston was typical of the evangelical movement in American religion during the second part of the nineteenth century. Both Protestant and Catholic leaders searched out vowed women and/or communities of Catholic women religious to work in rural settlements and urban centers. Their assigned task was to

establish comprehensive benevolent institutions to care and serve the proletariat.⁸

The American Catholic Church in the nineteenth century was an impoverished institution. Unlike the established Protestant benevolent societies, the Catholic Church had limited access to economic resources. Faced with the dynamics of little money and an exploding Catholic immigrant population, the Church turned to the free labor of Catholic women religious to provide education, medical care, and social services.⁹

The Catholic Church offered a network of institutional welfare services to its immigrants. Although these social services were minimal by contemporary standards, they were recognized as a safe haven by those in need. Furthermore, Catholic sisters did not approach the reality of poverty with condescending attitudes or judgment, but, rather, attached a spiritual dimension to the plight of the poor. As the historians Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown point out, the Catholic hierarchy claimed that the poor belonged to the Catholic Church.¹⁰

By using the skills and knowledge of a large number of women religious, the North American bishops found a nonprofit resource with minimal needs. The Grey Nuns, like most communities of women religious, worked for little if any material compensation. Their acumen as fundraisers, marketers, and administrators, however, was valued in the emerging American urban healthcare marketplace. The close proximity of sister-nurses to their patients enabled them to administer to their spiritual needs. This connection was well-recognized by Church authorities. Both the acknowledgment of their professional abilities and the powerful position they held as the most visible representatives of the Catholic Church nurtured a perspective among women religious like the Grey Nuns that led them to value their ministry. This in turn, strengthened their commitment to live independently and autonomously as a female community dedicated to their ministry at a time when women were barred from voting and too often confined to the world of domesticity.

Who were Lewiston's first Grey Nuns? They were Sister Adéline Le Blanc, Sister Rosalie Galipeau, and Sister Alphonsine Côté. Sister Le Blanc was thirty-four years old and had worked as a Grey Nun in both Manitoba and at the Saint Elizabeth Hospice in Farham, Quebec. She would become the Superior of the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes in 1892. Sister Galipeau, thirty-one years old, also came from a farming background. Sister Côté was the oldest member of the tiny community

at forty-eight and from the most educated family, members of Quebec's bourgeoisie. Sister Côté had worked at two Grey Nun institutions previously: the Hospital General in Sorel, Quebec and the Hospice du Sacré-Coeur in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Sister Côté was selected by the order's constitutional electoral process to be the "superieure-foundatrice" in Lewiston. She held this office in the community until the Grey Nuns' health care ministry in Lewiston became a reality. Sister Côté then returned to Saint-Hyacinthe in 1887 remaining there until her death in 1911.¹¹

Within a month of their arrival, this tiny band of religious would grow through the addition of two sisters, Sisters Philomène Champoux and Corine Frédérick, sent from Saint-Hyacinthe. Although travel among the ministries constituted a significant expense for the order, it continued throughout the period of this study. The order's accounting book, the "Journal," details various modes of travel used to mitigate expenses, but apparently the benefit of shared experience and education was so valued by the order that cost was of secondary importance. Furthermore, both the temporal and final religious vows which a young woman would take on her journey to become a Grey Nun were always professed at the order's mother house in Saint-Hyacinthe. This practice continued even when the Lewiston foundation became linguistically, legally, and financially independent from the Canadian branch. Whether in Canada or the United States, a Grey Nun from the Saint-Hyacinthe community always remained a Sister of Charity of Saint-Hyacinthe.¹²

Detailed information on the lives of individual Grey Nuns is difficult to find. Following the death of a sister, a Grey Nun chronicler would often record the deceased's accomplishments and location of ministry in a private community obituary, but this information was neither recorded in a consistent manner nor made available to the public. Only immediate family members would have received a copy of the sister's obituary.

The *Chronique*, however, contains information about events that had an impact on the lives of individual sisters and consequently the order in general. It provides evidence, for instance, of the order's commitment to the sisters' life-long education, intra-community support, and job mobility.

From the start, the Grey Nuns valued practicality. When considering Hevey's request, the Mother Superior and her Council demanded that Reverend Hevey acquire suitable lodgings for the sisters before they departed Saint-Hyacinthe. In response Hevey wrote on September 20, 1878:

I will give a lot of land 100 feet by 50 feet on the corners of Pierce and Walnut Street. On this lot two houses of wood are located which I will unite with a passage for easier access. The first house is about 22 feet long 20 feet wide with an addition of 18 feet. The second house is 25 by 22 feet. This last house has two stories and the other one has one and a half stories. I commit myself for the first year to furnish to the sisters what could be lacking towards their expenses for the year.¹³

Despite Hevey's assurances to the Mother Superior the condition of this complex was poor: it lacked insulation, furniture, and was too small for their Lewiston apostolate. Furthermore when the Grey Nuns began their residence at the Pierce and Walnut property they also accepted financial responsibility for the property if their ministry did not succeed.¹⁴

By the end of the first year, the Grey Nuns had established the "Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes, a corporation for Benevolent, Charitable and Educational purposes," a name that had been selected by the Grey Nuns' Council before the departure for Lewiston. When the deeds were signed, the Grey Nuns became a community of poor French-Canadian Catholic women competing to survive in a male-dominated Yankee culture. Nevertheless, the Grey Nuns of Lewiston were determined to live independently from male domination as a community of women religious who were dedicated to an apostolic life of charity, benevolence, and education.¹⁵

Responding to the Needs of the Community, 1878-1888

Following their spiritual heritage as Grey Nuns, the sisters began their work by directing their apostolate to the marginalized population of Lewiston: women and the children of immigrants. At first they provided shelter to the homeless and nursing care to the ill. Both the Grey Nuns and the local Catholic clergy, however, realized that the economic survival and success of all non-English speaking immigrants depended upon their comprehension of the English language. The Grey Nuns thus expanded their ministry to include educational endeavors for French-Canadian children. This decision was not only supported by the local community but also drew upon the directives issued by the American Catholic hierarchy.¹⁶

As early as 1851 the *Metropolitan Catholic Almanac* expressed the need for religious communities to establish schools for educating the expanding Catholic population within the environment of their faith:

The wide-spread heresy of our land, and its vast efforts of propagandism, the mixture of Catholics with Protestants, especially in parts seldom visited by a priest, the growing materialism of the age, which imperceptibly but effectually weans the heart from the spiritual objects of faith, are causes that still operate largely to the disadvantage of religion, and call for the most vigorous measures to oppose their influence. These will be found in the continual accession of pious and learned clergymen to the field of the ministry, in the spiritual retreats for the clergy and laity that are so effectual in renovating the life of the soul, and in the establishment of Catholic schools, under the charge of religious orders or congregations, for the imparting of a solid and virtuous education, and in various other means which the wisdom of the bishops has adopted.¹⁷

In 1884, at the Catholic Church's Third Plenary Council, American archbishops, bishops, abbots, and superiors of religious orders would decree that "every parish was to have a school within two years of the council unless the bishops judged otherwise." Yet the Grey Nuns had founded their parochial school, l'Ecole Notre Dame de Lourdes on November 21, 1878, preceding the educational mandate of the Third Plenary Council by six years. Arguably the Grey Nuns understood the importance of education without prompting from Church authorities. The Grey Nuns' school, furthermore, represented the first bilingual educational institution in the State of Maine. Unfortunately no evidence has survived detailing the curriculum or the percentage of English taught at l'Ecole Notre Dame de Lourdes, but according to documents in the Chancery of the Diocese of Portland, the French language remained the predominant language in all Lewiston parochial schools, except in the Anglophone St. Joseph and Wallace schools, until after World War I.¹⁸

Over 200 students attended the Grey Nuns' school during its first year. Yet the need for English language skills among French-Canadian adults could not be met by a daytime school because the demanding schedule of the textile mills prohibited participation in daytime academics. The Grey Nuns responded to this need and opened an evening school for young French-Canadian women in February 26, 1879. The *Chronique* writer recorded that the demands of these two schools, in addition to their nursing of the poor and ill, however, caused the sisters "extreme exhaustion" and eventually the evening school had to be discontinued.¹⁹

From the very beginning, the Lewiston Grey Nuns encountered economic hardship. In addition to Hevey's fiscal requirements, the community also had to sustain themselves and the poor who sought their care.

As a result, they turned to fundraising and appealed directly to the parishioners of St. Peter and Paul. As late as 1908 the Grey Nun who was the Directress of the Girls' Orphanage wrote: "It is in favor of these children [girls who had no relatives] that the Sisters of Charity are obligated to make special calls upon the charity of their good friends, who not only give out of their pockets, but will go all over Lewiston in search of the public money." In addition to making "special calls" the sisters supported themselves and their institutions in a number of ways. They taught, nursed, sewed, cooked, cleaned, held bazaars, sheltered and cared for children. This intense need to acquire funding for their ministry fostered independence, creativity, aggressiveness, managerial, and organizational skills among the sisters. If the Grey Nuns were to survive they had to develop a public relations campaign that skillfully marketed their community's resources as nurses, educators, artisans and welfare providers, while not stirring up anti-Catholic animosity.²⁰

Although they faced obstacles of language, religion, and gender, the Grey Nuns did have the moral credibility of their habit to help them gain social acceptance. As veiled women their behavior was not interpreted as violating the social norms of appropriate feminine activities. In contemporary marketing terminology the Grey Nuns' habit functioned as a trademark guaranteeing to the public that these women lived in communion with God. Their actions drew upon the spiritual authority of their commitment as "Brides of Christ." This, in turn, gave the sisters a public power that they did not hesitate to use for the benefit of their activities.

In the field of providing child care services the Grey Nuns of Lewiston were first able to blend their spirituality with pragmatic, essential services to Lewiston's working poor. Work in Lewiston's textile mills was both physically and psychologically brutal. In the Lewiston mill complex the weekly shift ran from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. with one forty-five minute break. Saturday schedules varied beginning at 6 a.m. and stopping at noon or extending to 6:30 p.m. With no child labor laws or protective services in nineteenth-century America, entire French-Canadian families worked in the mills regardless of the sex and age of the family members. Verifying child labor in Lewiston's mills is difficult because of the accounting methods used by the mill overseers, but the Maine French-Canadian historian Yves Frenette has, nevertheless, estimated that by 1870 ninety-one percent of French-Canadian children ranging in age from ten to sixteen years labored in either Lewiston or Auburn mills.²¹



Providing child care for the children of Lewiston's mill workers was an essential part of the Grey Nuns' mission. *Courtesy St. Mary's Regional Medical Center.*

Demerise Charest was the first child placed with the sisters for shelter and care in June 1879, only seven months after the sisters' arrival from Saint-Hyacinthe. By 1883 the sisters provided both long- and short-term shelter and care for thirteen children. Child care services also provided a moderate but dependable source of income for the sisters when a parent could make a donation. All of the children lived and learned with the sisters, occupying the same tiny domain on Pierce and Walnut Streets, until the community relocated in 1888. Child care would remain a central part of the Grey Nuns' social service organization until Saint Joseph Orphanage closed in 1965.²²

Although the children were identified by the Grey Nuns as "orphans," the fluidity of their movement in and out of the Grey Nuns' supervision indicates that they had families and other sources of care. The percent-

age of children listed in the Registre with both parents deceased comprised a minority. The Grey Nuns never limited their outreach to parentless children. The “orphanage” was actually a place of refuge for the burdened wage-labor parent: a facility that provided care to children whose parents required assistance. In the 1908 *Annual Report of the Girls’ Orphanage*, 24 of the 115 girls who had lived in the orphanage during the year, or 20%, paid full board; 40 children, or 34%, paid partial board, while 51 children or 44% were cared for gratis. Furthermore the sisters’ orphanage also functioned as an inclusive child care facility which was open to any Catholic immigrant child regardless of their ethnic heritage or place of birth. The willingness of the Catholic laity to place their children with the Grey Nuns reflected a perception of the Grey Nuns as the caring daughters of a mothering Church.²³

The Grey Nuns’ religious self-understanding and professional skills led them to embrace the children and women of Lewiston who were in most need of domestic aid and physical care. Their response was to turn their convent into a surrogate home for the children and a hospice to the suffering ill. In modern terms, the sisters’ convent became the equivalent of a contemporary assisted living facility and child welfare center. By establishing an orphanage with an open door policy, not limited to parentless children, the Grey Nuns created a flexible institution that was directed to the particular needs of Lewiston’s Catholic working poor during the various stages of that community’s development.

The Golder House: The Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes

By 1888 two separate and distinct volunteer hospitals were simultaneously emerging in Lewiston. One was the Androscoggin County Medical Association—moneyed, privileged, Protestant, and male—and the other was the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes—poor, immigrant, Catholic and female. By the beginning of 1888 the Grey Nuns had cared for thirty-seven women and children. At the same time, the ACMA was still entangled in a fundraising dilemma, a situation that compromised the association’s ability to proceed with the establishment of a hospital facility. The ACMA filed incorporation papers for their hospital, Central Maine General Hospital, on December 26, 1888. But not until the CMGH board secured \$10,000 dollars in a state grant matched by public donations could they purchase and renovate the Bearce Estate in Lewiston. Central Maine General Hospital admitted its first patient on July 1, 1891.²⁴

The Grey Nun leadership shared with the trustees of the ACMA the difficulties of establishing a hospital. While the lack of funds had stopped the ACMA from doing more than establishing a hospital on paper, however, the Grey Nuns were not so easily stymied. Regardless of financial obstacles, they had actively engaged as providers of healthcare since their arrival in 1878. The absence of a medical facility and a secure source of funding did not deter the sisters from ministering care. Drawing from their religious training and practices the sisters interpreted obstacles as an opportunity to live in a closer union with the suffering Christ of their faith. The founding stories of Saint Marguerite d'Youville and those of the Saint-Hyacinthe community furnished a powerful legacy which encouraged the Lewiston community. Nevertheless the practical demands of their ministry drove the order into debt. The sisters did not turn to the Portland Diocese for relief, but, rather, asked the women and the laity of Lewiston for financial assistance. This decision by the sisters not only avoided economic dependency upon the Portland Diocese but it also blocked the right of the hierarchy to control the sisters' activities through monetary channels; and thus protected their autonomy.

The Grey Nuns' enterprises received financial support from a local group of Catholic French-Canadian women known as the Association des Dames de Charité." The Dames' expressed purpose was to "second the efforts of the Sisters of Charity in their work with the poor and the sick and to help pay off the enormous debt which the sisters had incurred." The money raised from bazaars and raffles held by the Dames de Charité was an essential source of income for the sisters. In 1884, the Dames de Charité's gift of \$141.39 dollars represented the largest monetary contribution for that year.²⁵

In addition to the support of the Association des Dames de Charité, the Grey Nuns also received financial compensation from the Dominican Fathers for teaching in the Dominican Block's parochial school in Petite Canada. The Dominican Block functioned as a French-Canadian community center housing both educational and social activities. When the facility opened in 1883 nine Grey Nuns served as teachers to 700 children. Beginning in 1886 the Grey Nuns' teaching ministry at the Dominican Block was assisted by the Marist Brothers who assumed responsibility for the boys in the upper grades.²⁶

The Grey Nuns' contributions to St. Peter and Paul Parish as educators, while minimally compensated, drained their resources to pursue their primary vocation as a community of sister-nurses. Not until the ar-

rival of two more Catholic teaching-sister communities, Les Dames de Sion in 1892-1904, and Les Congregation de St. Dominique de Nancy in 1904, and the expansion of the Marists' efforts, were the Grey Nuns relieved of their formal teaching responsibilities to French-Canadian children outside of their orphanages.

By the end of August 1888 the order's Journal showed a balance of \$15,802.17 dollars. Yet by the beginning of the following month the balance was reduced to \$383.96. No accounting or explanation was recorded in the Journal's ledger for this withdrawal, but the absence of this money in their accounts coincided with a down payment by the sisters on the purchase of a thirty-six acre estate known as the Sarah J. Golder property. Sister St. Charles signed on behalf of the Sisters of Charity as the "President of The Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes." By this signature a French-Canadian, woman religious was recognized as the first chief executive of a Lewiston hospital. The boldness of the Grey Nuns' actions was balanced by their recognition of the prejudices that surrounded them. The hospital's founding was recorded in the order's *Annales* with the following commentary: "We felt instinctively the deep aversion of these old Puritans at the mere thought [that] the first institution for the care of the sick would be entrusted to ladies whose names and habits aroused suspicions."²⁷

The Sarah J. Golder estate included a large Victorian house located on Sabbatus and Pine Streets on the outskirts of nineteenth-century Lewiston. The sisters described the Golder location as "in the suburbs of the city, commanding a magnificent view, overlooking the twin cities of Lewiston and Auburn. It is situated in the midst of a vast estate, where quiet reigns and wherein a clear and healthy atmosphere makes it an ideal stop for such an institution." Once the real estate transaction was finalized the sisters began an immediate renovation of the Golder house, remolding it into a hospital that also included a long-term care facility. The sisters set the "price of board" for the patients at "three dollars and fifty cents per week, in the common wards, and one or two dollars per day, in private rooms, according to accommodations. These amounts include both board and medical and surgical attendance by the Hospital Staff."²⁸

In the history of American medical care, the transformation of large Victorian houses into hospitals was a common practice. Not until the twentieth century were most hospital buildings designed and built as medical facilities. The Grey Nuns remodeled the Golder estate into a thirty-six bed hospital that was divided into wards for female and male

patients under the authority of a sister-nurse. Only the wealthy were able to afford the cost of a private room and a personal nurse. Thirty of the beds were designated for short-term patients with six private rooms for either long-term paying patients or boarders. The sisters occupied the building's top floor. By November the Golder house had become the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes to the populace of Lewiston or Saint-Hyacinthe Hospital to the French Canadians of Quebec.²⁹

As the frost of a Maine November settled upon the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes, fifteen Grey Nuns accompanied by forty orphan girls quietly moved into the first hospital in Lewiston. The official dedication of the Asylum by the Portland Bishop, held on April 28, 1889, was a day of firsts in the history of Maine. The Asylum was dedicated by the first African-American Catholic Bishop, The Most Reverend James A. Healy of Portland, Maine; it was the first Catholic hospital in Maine, and the first public hospital in the city of Lewiston. The hospital had a small staff of French-Canadian physicians under the leadership of Dr. L. J. Martel.³⁰

Unlike the Androscoggin County Medical Association, board members the Grey Nuns did not initially seek government aid for their young hospital. What the sisters wanted and needed, however, was the acceptance of their institution by the medical community, but, unfortunately, this would take years to achieve. Although the hospital's mission statement clearly indicated that the hospital was non-sectarian, the sisters recorded the prejudice they encountered from the non-French medical community in Lewiston: "Non-Catholic physicians boycotted and prevented non-Catholic patients from entering the hospital. The most malicious innuendoes were circulated concerning the sisters. Rumors were spread that the medical organization was poor."³¹

The physicians of the ACMA who staffed Central Maine General Hospital freely admitted their bigotry. In the first annual report their board reported that: "Our French Catholics saw their opportunity if they did not fully comprehend our need. The Sisters of Charity built an orphanage with hospital wards attached, and these were open to Catholic and Protestant patients alike, and the Androscoggin County Medical Association was invited to assume the medical and surgical care of them. This offer was a surprise. Was it best to accept it? Was this institution now and prospectively to answer our expectations? After careful consideration the offer was unanimously declined." Although the CMGH's board admitted that their decision was "rude and ungracious" they felt it was justified upon the grounds that "only a hospital absolutely non-sectarian, to which State aid could be rendered, could ex-



In 1888 the Grey Nuns purchased the Sarah J. Golder property and established the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes, Lewiston's first public hospital. This image shows the original nineteenth-century house on the property with the Grey Nuns' 1888 hospital wing addition to the right. The large brick building at the rear is the 1902 hospital building. *Courtesy St. Mary's Regional Medical Center.*

pect to receive such support and patronage from our community." The position of the CMGH board disregarded the sisters' mission statement. Furthermore, the CMGH could hardly be described as "absolutely non-sectarian" itself. CMGH's 1892 *Annual Report* listed the eighth largest source of income as "Hospital Sunday collections" and, the following year, CMGH was again the recipient of funds collected through "Church Collections."³²

The discrimination practiced by the ACMA resulted in hardship, but the Grey Nuns found a way to mitigate the bigotry. Canadian interns from Quebec were invited to train in their American hospital; the sisters allowed their patients to summon private physicians to the hospital, and the sisters used their own medical knowledge gained through long years of nursing and care giving. True to their vows and dedication to the virtue of humility, the Grey Nuns in their public accounts recorded these

years of bigotry and suffering as only a time of "Hardship." The 1902 *Annual Report* included a historical overview that reduced the difficult years to a fable: "Here History comes in, and you know she is the sister deity to Justice, the blind woman. She relates sad things, speaks of a dreadful opposition that was aroused against the Sisters, Hospital and so forth. Let it suffice to mention the fact without illustrating exactly what it was, and simply state that for months and years the Sisters had to experience what is really the "bread and butter struggle for life."³³

Despite the hardships, the sisters persevered and the hospital not only survived but grew under the Grey Nuns' leadership. During the first years, those who sought the Grey Nuns' care were never turned away, even if it "necessitated the placing of extra beds" in the wards. The sisters' open admission policy welcomed all who suffered regardless of the nature of the illness. When typhoid fever struck the Maine towns of Rumford Falls, Jay and Livermore Falls in 1896, twenty-four of the twenty-five fever victims admitted to the sisters' hospital had "satisfactory results." The directors of CMGH did not adopt a similar open admission policy, but rather, practiced a selective admission policy: "[I]f it is anything of a contagious or incurable nature the application is at once denied, as this hospital is not intended for cases of that kind. Only acute and curable cases are taken . . . and more good can be done by the admission of such patients as are curable than by filling up the wards and rooms with a class whose cases are hopeless."³⁴

In 1892 the sisters recognized that the security of their institution required adaptation to the United States's bureaucracy. Just as the ACMA leadership had incorporated themselves and their hospital into Central Maine General Hospital in 1891, the Grey Nuns now incorporated themselves and their four-year-old institution into the Hospital of the Society of the Sisters of Charity of Lewiston, Maine on July 2, 1892. The incorporation as the Sisters of Charity of Lewiston, however, did not alter the religious self-understanding of the Grey Nuns as an "educational, benevolent and charitable organization."³⁵

Almost a year prior to the July 2, 1892 incorporation of the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Grey Nuns had drawn up a financial contract with their founding sponsor, Rev. Hevey, in which Hevey "donated" \$12,000 dollars to the hospital. The interest on this gift, however, was paid semi-annually to Hevey or his heirs. Rather than an act of simple philanthropy, his support of the Grey Nuns' hospital was a venture capital investment by Hevey to benefit himself and his family. The Grey Nuns needed this loan in order to proceed with their benevolent ambi-

tions to establish a hospital for the suffering poor, and their situation was not particularly unique. The exploitation of Catholic women religious by the clergy, from requiring the sisters to be the rectory housekeepers to the acquisition of their money and property, was prevalent in the American Catholic church of the nineteenth century.³⁵

Between 1888 and 1894 the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes provided medical care to 630 patients with only 57 deaths. This represented an 89% survival rate and Lewiston's Yankee elite began to recognize the success of the Grey Nuns' health care ministry. In 1893 a committee of physicians from Lewiston and supporters from a variety of professional and geographical areas traveled to Augusta and sought state support for the sisters' hospital. The State agreed to award \$1250 dollars in the form of a yearly grant to the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes. Although this grant represented only 5% of the State funding received by CMGH in 1893, it did signify the political, social and professional acceptance of the Grey Nuns' hospital by the Maine polity.³⁷

While the Grey Nuns were acquiring political and business acumen as hospital administrators and nurses, they continued to work in a world defined by gender, religious and professional authority. This "male only" boundary required that the sisters become negotiators in order for their hospital to remain autonomous. They had to learn to counter the negative attitudes toward sister-nurses and caregivers while maintaining their authority as directors of a Catholic female medical institution. To this end they used their image as veiled holy women to secure their right to be present on the hospital wards and in the operating room. The Grey Nuns' behavior drew the attention of the editor of the hospital's 1902 *Annual Report*: "Sisters of Charity never have their pictures made individually, and even if you happen to find one of them in a group, she will either be way back in the rear and in the shade, or turn her face from yours." This anonymity gave them unique negotiating tools. The "good sisters" working in the silence of their hospital wards and living a devoted life in a religious community were not perceived as a threat by either secular or religious authority. This, in turn, gave the sisters the ability to proceed with their nursing and care ambitions with minimal outside interference. The Grey Nuns also were not economically compensated for their work in the hospital and they made no demands upon either medical or Church authorities for compensation, a behavior which Maine's political elite found unique. Following his initial visit to the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes, the State Representative S. J. Kelley commented: "The thing which struck me most forcibly about the whole



The Grey Nuns built an impressive new hospital facility in 1902. The building, which came to be known as the Hospital General Sainte-Marie, St. Mary's Hospital, had a three-story central section containing the hospital wards and three octagonal towers. The towers flanking the front facade housed the chapel (right) and the surgery (left). *Courtesy St. Mary's Regional Medical Center.*

affair is the fact that no one around the institution draws a salary—not a single individual.”³⁸

Although initially ignored by Lewiston's medical community the people of Lewiston always sought out the sisters' care. By the mid 1890s the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes strained to meet the public's demand for hospital services. Infectious disease, industrial accidents, birth complications, childhood illness, the effects of poor nutrition, exhaustion, and overwork were the lower classes' reality. The most common medical conditions of those hospitalized were: typhoid fever, bronchitis, acute diarrhea, neurasthenia, and uterus curetted and dilated. Between 1888 and 1898 the sisters provided care to 1427 patients. Of these only 133 died in the sisters' care. That represented an 11% mortality rate. With a staff of sisters never exceeding nineteen sister-nurses, an 89% survival rate was a significant achievement. Furthermore, the demand for nursing by the sisters was not limited to their hospital wards. Remaining faithful to their original mission the sisters continued to “visit the poor in their homes.” The Lewiston Board of Health also requested

that the Grey Nuns fulfill the role of what would be defined in contemporary terms as “public nurses.” The population of Lewiston suffered two smallpox epidemics in 1900 and 1905. The most serious cases were removed to a city-maintained Pest House and the Lewiston Board of Health asked the Grey Nuns to act as nurses there. A similar request was not made to the CMGH nurses, and although the Grey Nuns fulfilled this nursing obligation, it caused them “to refuse other calls from outside [the hospital] for the same line of work, except in a few instances.”³⁹

By 1899, the public demand for medical care had outgrown the sisters’ facilities and the Grey Nuns extended their commitment as health care providers to opening a drop-in clinic directed by an ophthalmic specialist for the treatment of eye, ear, nose and throat ailments. The sisters called this clinic their “outdoor department.” By the conclusion of 1899 this clinic had treated 289 patients. In spite of the success of their “outdoor department” the hospital wards were still inadequate. According to the 1899 *Annual Report* “a large number of applicants who sought admission to the Hospital had to be refused owing to lack of accommodations.” The sisters had to either expand their current hospital or construct a new facility.⁴⁰

By the end of 1899 the Grey Nuns had prepared an aggressive plan to build a new modern hospital on the Sarah Golder property. Within a year architectural plans had been drawn and funds secured. The Lewiston architect William R. Miller was selected by the sisters and the Dominican architect Paul Charland was also consulted. The sisters and architects agreed upon a three-story brick building distinguished by a trio of octagonal towers that dominated the corners of the front and west side elevations. One tower was designated for the surgery and the other tower became the hospital chapel. The wards were located between the two towers and opened onto the chapel.

Once the design was completed for the new hospital, the Grey Nuns invited Bishop James Healy to review the hospital plans and the community’s finances. Bishop Healy found “the finances of the Sisters [were] in sufficiently good order to warrant the erection of a new and modern hospital.” It was twelve years from the opening of the Asylum of Our Lady of Lourdes.⁴¹

Two more years would elapse before the Grey Nuns’ vision became a reality. On April 8, 1902, a crowd of 10,000 gathered to celebrate the official blessing of the sisters’ hospital by Portland Bishop William O’Connell. The Grey Nuns had built a 150 bed hospital, with an additional twenty-five bassinets in the new maternity ward. The official cost was

reported to have been \$100,000. The hospital cost, however, excluded the twenty-three years of unpaid labor of the Lewiston Grey Nuns. Perhaps this is why the Lewiston populace simply called the hospital, the "Sisters' Hospital." Not until 1908 did the facility become the Hospital General Sainte-Marie, St. Mary's Hospital.

The sisters who had built St. Mary's Hospital lived exhausting and demanding lives fulfilling their vocation as Grey Nuns. Despite these hardships their lives are a story of achievement. Their accomplishments are all the more significant in view of the fact that the Grey Nuns lived in a foreign, Yankee-dominated, industrial, urban environment. The sisters had to learn new urban life skills while maintaining their ethno-religious identity as a community of Catholic French-Canadian sister-nurses. Yet it was precisely this commitment to be identified as a Grey Nun, which may seem to the modern sensibility as a radical surrendering of self, that ultimately nourished within each sister the necessary ability to balance successfully the claims of different loyalties and to thrive.

I would like to thank Dr. Billie Gammon and Marguerite Stapleton, Vice President St. Mary's Regional Medical Center for their support of my research. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Washburn Humanities Center Conference, Livermore, Maine, June 2000 and at the History of Women Religious Conference at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 17-10, 2001.

NOTES

1. The historical literature on the industrial transformation of America is vast. For a succinct overview, see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search For Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967). The major mills and their dates of establishment are: The Bates Mills (Nos. 1, 2, and 3 in 1850, 1854 and 1868); the Hill Mills (Nos. 1 and 2 in 1854 and 1864); the Androscoggin Mill, 1854-1861; the Continental Mill, 1858; the Avon Mill and the Cumberland Mill. There was also a bleachery in operation by 1860. There is no consensus on the precise dates for the mills due to confusion over the dates of establishment and operation. Also, a lot of archival material relating to the mills has been lost or destroyed. These dates are from *Paroisse Canadienne-Française de Lewiston (Maine) Album Historique* (Lewiston, ME: Les Pères Dominicains, 1899), 21-22, Saint Peter and Paul Archives, Lewiston, Maine (hereafter SPPA).

2. Madeleine Giguere, Carmel Laverdiere, "Chronology SS. Peter & Paul Parish 1870-1996," (Lewiston, Maine, September-June, 1995-1996), 1. Yves Roby, "A Portrait of the Female Franco-American Worker (1865-1930), in

Steeple and Smokestacks, Claire Quintal, ed. (Worcester: Institut Français Assumption College, 1996), 545-563.

3. Book II, History of Parishes, East Millinocket thru Lubec, Saint Peter and Paul, Diocese of Portland Chancery Archives, Portland, Maine (hereafter PCA). Yves Roby, *Les Franco-Américains De La Nouvelle-Angleterre 1776-1930* (Quebec: Septentrion, 1990), esp. 63, 68; James W. Searles, *Immigrants from the North* (Bath, ME: Hyde School, 1982), 50. *To Make a Living: Franco-American Work Traditions in Lewiston and Auburn* (Lewiston: Atrium Gallery, Lewiston-Auburn College/University of Southern Maine, 1994). *Sun Journal* (Lewiston), 14 July 2002, p. B5. For an extensive historical demographic study of French Canadian immigration, see Ralph Dominic Vicero, "Immigration of French Canadians to New England, 1840-1900: A Geographical Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1968).

4. Petite Canada was a geographically bounded area in Lewiston that was defined by a community of tightly packed three- to four-story apartment buildings along River, Oxford, Lincoln, Cedar and Chestnut Streets. This created a rectangular district known also as "the Island." It was planned by the directors of the Franklin Company, who owned power rights and large real estate holdings in Lewiston, see James S. Leamon & Grinley Barrows, "Little Canada and Vicinity" in *Historical Lewiston: A Textile City in Transition*, ed. James S. Leamon (Lewiston: Central Maine Vocational Technical Institute, 1976), 27-47. For letters pertaining to land development and relations with Lewiston's Catholic community, see the Franklin Company and Related Enterprises Archival Collection, Lewiston Public Library, Lewiston Maine.

5. Marguerite d'Youville was born on October 15, 1701 as Marguerite Dufrost de la Jemmerais at Varennes, Quebec. In 1737 she founded the Congregation des Soeurs de la Charité de Montreal "Soeurs Grises," the Grey Nuns. The order received Patent Letters of Approval from Louis XV in 1753. Marguerite d'Youville died on 1771. Pope John XXIII named her the Mother of University Charity and she was canonized on November 9, 1990. She was the first Canadian-born Roman Catholic saint. Albertine Ferland-Angers, *Mother d'Youville: First Canadian Foundress*, trans. Richard R. Cooper (Montreal: Sisters of Charity of Montreal, 2000).

6. Binder, "Clergy D-K," PCA. Marie P. Badeau et al., SS. *Peter and Paul Parish Lewiston, Maine 1870-1996, Paroisse Saint Pierre et Saint Paul* (Lewiston: SS. Peter and Paul Parish, 1996), 11-12.

7. Chronique, No. 69, Sisters of Charity, Saint-Hyacinthe Archives, Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, Canada (hereafter SHA). This archive is not open to the public. All material must be requested in writing from the current archivist. Translation of all documents from French into English by Sister Jacqueline Peloquin and Susan Hudson unless otherwise noted. In January 1992 the sponsorship of St. Mary's Hospital was transferred by the Sisters of Charity of Saint-Hyacinthe to the Sisters of Charity of Montreal who are members of the Covenant Health Systems, Inc. Lexington, Massachusetts. Mission Effectiveness Manuscript Collection, St. Mary's Regional Medical Center, Lewiston, Maine.

8. For an admirable study of nineteenth-century nursing by Catholic women religious, Anglican sisters and deaconesses in the United States, Australia and England; see Sioban Nelson, *Say Little, Do Much: Nurses, Nuns, and Hospitals in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

9. See Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

10. Dorothy M. Brown and Elizabeth McKeown, *The Poor Belong to Us, Catholic Charities and American Welfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

11. When these three Grey Nuns departed from the Saint-Hyacinthe community it reduced the mother house to ninety-nine sisters. Claude-Marie Gagnon, *La Maison Jaune* (Quebec: Fides Editions, 1990), 267-75.

12. Soeurs de la Mission, No. 752.02.02, SHA. For example, in September 1884 the community recorded an expense of \$7.50 for "pais de voyage de S. du Sacré Cours" and the driver was an additional cost of \$3.00 "per divers," Journal 1884-1894, Sisters of Charity Hospital Archives, St. Mary's Regional Medical Center, Lewiston, Maine.

13. Chronique, No. 79, SHA.

14. Book 97, page 324, Androscoggin County Registry of Deeds, Androscoggin County Courthouse, Auburn, Maine. Chronique, No. 79, SHA.

15. Chronique, No. 2, September 24, 1878, SHA.

16. The length of time that the homeless or ill spent in the sisters' care varied from a month to nine years. Registre, Sisters of Charity Hospital Archives. Entry #28 was admitted into the sisters' care on May 10, 1887 and discharged a month later on June 19, 1887. Entry #2 was admitted into the sisters' care on July 6, 1881 and left nine years later on August 17, 1890.

17. "Progress of Catholicism," *The Metropolitan Catholic Almanac* (Baltimore, 1851), 235.

18. Michael Glazier & Thomas J. Shelley, eds. *The Encyclopedia of American Catholic History* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 75. Chronique, 13, SHA. "Lewiston," Education Files, PCA.

19. Chronique, No. 2, File 1, Drawer 1, SHA. Providing education to young women of the working class has always been a focus of the Grey Nuns teaching ministry. Sister Jacqueline Peloquin interview with author, February 2001.

20. *Annual Report of the Girls' Orphanage of Lewiston, Maine Under the Auspices of the Sisters of Charity, 1908* (Lewiston: Sisters of Charity, 1908), 7. Chronique, SHA.

21. Leamon, ed., *Historical Lewiston; To Make a Living: Franco-American Work Traditions in Lewiston and Auburn* (Lewiston: Atrium Gallery, Lewiston-Auburn College/University of Southern Maine, 1994).

22. Chronique, No. 2, SHA. Sommaire, 3, Sisters of Charity Hospital Archives. *Annual Report of the Girls' Orphanage* (1908), 6. SHA. Mission Effectiveness Manuscript Collection, St. Mary's Regional Medical Center. The practice of women religious communities sharing their private living space with orphans, boarders, and students until separate accommodations could be constructed was common during a new community's founding period when resources were scarce and living conditions were tentative.

23. *Annual Report of the Girls' Orphanage* (1908), 15. SHA. The *Annual Report* listed the birthplace of the girls in the orphanage. Children were born in Ireland, Nova Scotia, Canada and the United States.

24. *First Annual Report, Central Maine General Hospital* (Lewiston: Central Maine General Hospital, 1892), 8. Central Maine Medical Center Library, Lewiston, Maine.

25. Chronique, No. 2, SHA. This lay organization was attached to the parish of St. Peter and Paul. File, Les Dames de Charité, 2, SPPA. Journal 1884-1894, Sisters of Charity Hospital Archives.

26. *Paroisse Canadienne-Française de Lewiston (Maine), Album Historique*, 29-39, SPPA.

27. Journal 1884-1894, Sisters of Charity Hospital Archives. Book 131, page 9; book 129 page 264-268, Androscoggin County Registry of Deeds. Sister St. Charles was born Helen Hogue in Sherbrooke, Quebec on September 27, 1843. She entered the religious life at Saint-Hyacinthe in 1860 and professed as a Grey Nun on August 26, 1862. She died at the age of fifty-eight on January 2, 1901, Gagon, *La Maison Jaune*, 269. *Annales de la Communauté* 1888, SHA.

28. *Second Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity for 1894* (Lewiston, Maine: Sisters of Charity, 1895), 3. SHA.

29. Chronique, 115, SHA.

30. The New England educated Healy was born in Macon, Georgia. His father, Michael Morris Healy had been a successful white Irish immigrant planter and his mother, Mary Eliza, had been his slave. Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 147-152, 173. "Franco-American Doctors," Box 103, Franklin Company Archives, Lewiston Public Library.

31. *Second Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity* (1894), 3-5. *Annales*, 1888, SHA.

32. *First Annual Report, Central Maine General Hospital* (c. 1891-1892), 8, 11; *Second Annual Report, Central Maine General Hospital* (c. 1892-1893), 10.

33. *Ninth Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity* (1902), 7.

34. *Fourth Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity* (1896), 5. *Lewiston Journal*, Illustrated Magazine Section, September 28-October 3, 1901. 10.

35. Acte d'Incorporation des Soeurs de Lewiston, 2 Juillet 1892, SHA.

36. "Engagement de l'Asile N.D. de Lourdes avec Mounseigneur Hevey au su. du don de \$12,000.00 23 Mars 1891," SHA. This was almost a universal complaint among nineteenth-century women religious communities. The lack of status was especially difficult if the community was also composed of women who belonged to either an ethnic or racial minority.

37. *Second Annual Report, Central Maine General Hospital* (1893); *Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity*, 1889-94 and 1902; Sommaire, 1885-1904, SHA.

38. *Tenth Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity* (1902), 27. *Lewiston Journal*, Illustrated Magazine Section, February 2, 1901.

39. Sommaire des Entrees, Sorties, a Deces. Hommes, Femmes, Malades Hommes, Malade Femmes, Pensionnaires. 11, 16, 53, 62, 73, 82. Sisters of Charity Hospital Archives. *Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity* (1896-1898), 17-19; *Eleventh Annual Report, Hospital of the Sisters of Charity* (1888-1903), 10; Charlotte Michaud, "Franco-American," *Lewiston Sun Journal*, April 17, 1976,

40. Chronique, 6-7, SHA.

41. Annales, No. 4, SHA.